The Crew Size Fight: In this Corner, the Rail Carriers; In this Corner, the Workers!

In recent years, it has become crystal clear that the Class One rail carrier wish to operate trains with a single crew member. Likewise, it has become quite clear that the trainmen, engineers and their unions are as equally determined to maintain the standard two-person crew. The two sides are certainly at loggerheads on the issue, and it is doubtful that a compromise, one satisfactory to both sides, can be amicably reached.

In 2004, when the rail industry group - National Carriers Conference Committee (NCCC) - first proposed the idea of single employee train crews, a small group of dedicated union members – Railroad Operating Crafts United (ROCU) – worked diligently to sound the alarm, working to unite the unions of the operating crafts to oppose this idea. Believe it or not, most rails were completely ignorant of the carriers’ intentions. One of the biggest obstacles to building opposition was simply convincing rails that the carriers had this up their sleeve and were dead serious about running trains with one employee!

Fast forward to today, 15 years later, and you would have been hard pressed to find a railroad worker who is not aware of the carriers’ designs. So, the battle lines are drawn. They want it, we don’t. They are more arrogant, more cocksure, more anti-worker and more united through the near universal adoption of Precision Scheduled Railroading. In addition, they have been raking in record profits during that 15-year period and have emerged wealthier and more powerful than ever. On the propaganda front, they have long maintained that Positive Train Control (PTC) – now nearing full implementation nationwide – would render the two-person crew unnecessary and obsolete. And hardly a week goes by that we do not see yet another news clip extolling the virtues of autonomous vehicles. So the carriers have gained some impressive leverage with PTC on the one hand and the specter of autonomous trains/trucks on the other, to make the case for a “compromise” of a single crew member.

The Railroad Workers. Like the carriers, rail workers have achieved some important tactical advantages in recent years that we lacked when this fight first began.

1 – At the bargaining table, the workers and their unions have won decisive victories on two important properties, the BNSF and the WLE. On the former, the workers overwhelmingly defeated a Tentative Agreement that would have allowed for single crew member operations, despite the best efforts of the rail carrier, the General Committee (SMART GO-001), a former UTU President, the rail industry and its pundits. The majority of members from every terminal voted against the agreement systemwide. The carrier did even attempt to prolong the fight but simplyinked off. And the sell-out union officials were completely discredited. At the WLE, the unwavering decade-long solidarity of both engineers and trainmen defeated the attempt by the carrier to implement single employee crews, and won a contract with provisions for two-person crew minimums through 2026. Both fights resulted in decisive victories in the crew consist struggle, and both have been an inspiration and a confidence booster to trainmen and engineers on all properties nationwide.

2 – Legislatively, the unions of the operating crafts have won two-person crew bills now in seven states. Even though the FRA dealt us a setback in May 2019 (see details on Pages 3 and 6), these wins displayed the popularity of our cause, educating numerous citizens and politicians about the issue. Meantime, with those state laws now in limbo, the unions have stepped up the case for the Safe Freight Act at the national level, garnering more than 100 co-sponsors in the House. Public awareness of and support for the two-person crew has legitimized the cause, inspiring and building confidence among railroad workers.

3 – The Lac-Mégantic disaster continues to haunt the rail industry, as evidence continues to pile up, pointing the finger of blame at the rail carrier and its use of single employee train crews. This devastating wreck, one of the worst in decades, has become synonymous with single crew trains in the public mind.

4 – The operating craft unions, who were not long ago at each others’ throats, are now – and have been for six years or so – cooperating, legislatively and in bargaining. The BLET publicly condemned the BNSF deal of 2014, and a few weeks later adopted a Resolution of Support for the WLE workers’ struggle against single person crews. They and the trainmen’s union (SMART-TD) have stood together for the first time ever this last round of national handling. And as mentioned, both have been working together legislatively at the state and federal level.

5 – Compared to 15 years ago, most engineers and trainmen are dual crafted, and have been a member of each union in turn. The ranks see little difference, and often flow back and forth between the two crafts and the two unions, creating fertile ground for cross-craft and inter-union solidarity.

6 – Finally, PSR, the operating scheme that is listed as an advantage for the carriers, might also well be its Achilles heel. Based upon doing “more with less”, the Class One railroads – as we have seen in the last few years - cannot efficiently absorb any external disruption of service, whether this be weather events, unexpected upticks in traffic, or a labor disturbance. Taken together, all of the above factors combine to greatly increase rail labor’s capacity to defeat the carriers’ efforts to run trains with a single employee.

Conclusion

Just as in any war, there can be no foredrawn conclusions in the class war. The rail carriers have improved their tactical position for the fight, and so have the workers and their unions. And while no one can predict the outcome, we know this – the struggle awaits us and the showdown is coming. Our task now is to continually analyze our strengths and weaknesses, nurture the former and mitigate the latter, and to build up our confidence and preparedness for the contest.